



2nd December 2011

Assistant Secretary, Migration Planning and Strategies
DIAC
PO Box 25
Belconnen ACT 2616

Dear Mr van Vliet,

Re: Settlement Council Submission on the 2012-13 Migration Program

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is pleased to provide this submission into the 2012-13 Migration Program. SCOA represents the broad network of over 60 settlement agencies around Australia. As advocates and service providers, the sector has a unique knowledge of the realities of the settlement experience, over time, across the country, and among hundreds of different ethno-cultural communities.

SCoA's consultation with members and our research into the area have informed the preparation of this submission, which highlights the impact of ex-detention caseloads on settlement, and the importance of providing support to migrants and refugees settling in Australia.

Key issues covered in this submission are:

- The impact of the ex-detention caseload on settlement agencies
- The impact of the ex-detention caseload on the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP)
- The need for migration advice, particularly for humanitarian program entrants
- Concerns about the perceived lack of transparency in visa application processes, particularly in relation to the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP)
- The importance of providing support to migrants in terms of jobs and benefits
- The strain bridging visas put on extended family and the community

Impact of ex-detention caseload on settlement agencies

The settlement sector is seeing larger numbers of clients who have been recently released from detention with permanent visas, and who are thus eligible for settlement services under the Humanitarian Settlement Service. The sector is no stranger to changing demographics of entrants, and consequent changes in profile of need, however this particular cohort present with a range of needs and behaviours which relate quite particularly to their time spent in detention.

Clients released from detention present to agencies with a higher range of mental health issues, including self-harm issues. The sector has good connections with health providers across the

country, however we are receiving reports that mental health services are stretched, and are not always well equipped to deal with the specific needs of ex-detention clients.

Accommodation is also being reported as a challenge across the country. There are difficulties in obtaining rental accommodation for single men in terms of affordability, and for larger families in terms of availability of appropriate housing stock. At the lower end of the market vacancy rates are very low which creates pressure on families who may yet not have a good understanding of Australian tenancy laws, both in terms of their rights and responsibilities.

Agencies are also finding that clients who have been in detention are more likely to spontaneously move to a secondary settlement location. While this is often for good reasons (connecting with family, community or sourcing employment) it can create issues for settlement agencies who are trying to set up referrals, develop case management plans and provide settlement services for clients who may only stay in the area a short time.

Impact of ex-detention caseload on the Special Humanitarian Program

The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) remains very important for refugee and humanitarian entrants in terms of an avenue for family reunion, but in the last few years has been strained by very high numbers of applications, and a correspondingly high numbers of refusals, accompanied by very little information on the reasons for refusals. Given that many in the ex-detention caseload are being given permanent visas which come out of the allocation for the SHP there will be even lower acceptance rates than in the past. This is likely to have significant flow on effects for communities who are trying to sponsor family members to come to Australia. Family reunion has long been acknowledged as an important component of settlement, and thus lengthy delays will have negative impacts on individuals and communities.

The alternative visa categories which may be open to people seeking family reunion are generally expensive and difficult to obtain, given that refugees and humanitarian entrants are just at the beginning of establishing their lives in Australia, so do not have access to the financial resources to cover visa application fees and exam costs (for example).

The increased pressure on the SHP may also strain community harmony, which to date has remained positive despite significant negative media coverage of asylum seekers. The sector is concerned about portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers in relation to their method of travel, as this can create divisions with-in and between communities.

Migration advice needed

In addition to the points raised above about the pressure on the SHP greater access to free or low cost migration advice is needed. The complexity of the process requires support for many to manage. Greater provision of migration advice would both assist people make better stronger applications for family reunion, and also reduce the burden on the department of incomplete/inappropriate applications. IAAAS providers are also under pressure because of the

large caseload presented by clients in detention. This impacts on the availability of low cost or free migration services in the community.

Transparency of visa application process

Concern has been raised by the sector that the application process, particularly for the SHP, is perceived to lack transparency. Community members spend a great deal of time and effort putting applications together for the SHP and then, after considerable time has elapsed, receive a standard rejection letter. The rejection letters do not contain reasons for the rejection, which leaves people unclear on what steps they should take next.

Support needed for jobs and benefits

Accessing employment is one of the major concerns for newly arrived migrants and refugees. The two year exclusion period for migrants for social security benefits, and related services such as access to employment support, is creating hardship for some in the community, particularly migrants from refugee backgrounds (who come to Australia as migrants because of the problems with the SHP as mentioned above). Migrants (and refugees) can struggle to find work in their initial time in Australia, often having to accept jobs which are below their level of training or previous experience. This represents a waste of potential for Australia, and inhibits successful settlement. Allowing access to services would greatly assist the settlement process, enabling support where it is needed, and facilitating access to better jobs and connections in the community. The experience of the settlement sector in this area is also echoed in the findings from recent research undertaken by Professor Hugo on the subject (“Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants”).

Earlier in the year SCOA consulted with members and subsequently submitted a range of recommendations to DEEWR on this issue, including the recommendation that refugees require careful screening into JSA services to ensure they get the full range of appropriate support, and the recommendation that refugee and migrant entrants to Australia receive access to employment advisory support.

The strain bridging visas put on extended family and the community

The recent announcement of the increased use of bridging visas for clients released from detention is welcome in terms of mitigating the negative mental health impacts of detention, but the sector is concerned that the release of people on bridging visas without support will place a strain on extended family and the wider community. People on bridging visas often need specialist health services and a range of other supports, including help seeking work. Family and community can naturally provide support to an extent, however the sector is aware that the need for support may be quite high. There is also confusion within the sector (and the community) about the range of services and support bridging visa holders are eligible for, which is an additional complicating factor.

SCOA is conscious that some of these issues identified affect a range of government departments and different branches within the Department of Immigration. SCOA will also be raising issues relating to the humanitarian visas, such as the SHP, with the humanitarian branch of DIAC. SCOA also has ongoing relationships with a range of government departments, such as DHS, FACSIA and DOHA, where related issues are discussed.

Please feel free to contact me should you require clarification or further information on any of the points raised.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sky de Jersey', with a stylized, cursive style.

Sky de Jersey
Executive Officer

CC: Senator Kate Lundy, Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
CC: Karina Sommers, Director, CSM Research, Evaluation and Planning, Settlement Branch